

## Review

To reach the exhibition Content and Form on the 6<sup>th</sup> floor at the Victoria and Albert museum one passes through the most eclectic collection of ceramics in the world. It is a tough act to follow that Alison Britton's retrospective achieves with considerable artistic authority. The exhibition stands out as different from the permanent collection in a number of significant ways. It functions well in the bizarre context of the museum that robs so many other pots of their content. Unlike the permanent collection, there is a sense that each individual piece is valued whether attractive or not and, in the case of more recent work, given equal status by the way it has been displayed. In as far as it is possible to see the historic collection, crammed into showcases stacked high from floor to well above a domestic ceiling, the form of the majority derives from use. More recent acquisitions that have been prioritized with their own gallery are larger than is normally associated with domestic pottery as if to signify artistic aspiration and professional status; they are an overt display of prowess. In the context of the V&A's grandeur it feels arrogant and pompous, perpetuating the outdated certainties of when the museum was founded. Britton's exhibition, however, speaks of ongoing private obsession. There is a sense that each of Britton's pots seek, but never quite achieve, resolution. Her chosen scale is not bombastic but has an unsettling Alice in Wonderland quality. We are drawn into a world of uncertainty and anxiety. Her dominant making method of using pre-decorated flat slabs of clay to produce a kind of three-dimensional jigsaw puzzle can be seen as metaphor. Is a piece missing? What is the complete picture?

The exhibition, spanning over forty years, reveals that Britton has worked with very few types of pot: jug, dish, vase as well as a relatively limited and subdued range of surfaces. The predominantly smooth clay is painted or slipped in muted colours with a clear and/or semi opaque glaze. Though sensual, neither form nor surface engage in the material seduction so often associated with craft practice. Britton does not do sexy curves or narrow footed pirouettes. In earlier work Britton interrogates the clay with this somewhat austere vocabulary, but in a series made in 2011-12 called Flow she seems to be asking questions *with* the medium. Against current urban fashion she uses brown clay rather than ubiquitous white. The work appears more open to ambiguity, the metaphor of water allowing for a greater confluence of ideas supported by evocative titles such as 'runnel', 'outpour' and 'influx'. This play with words is again used with strong effect on a series of wall pieces made in 2015. While 'disheveled' and 'charger' clearly locate the work in a familiar historic pottery context, they are titles with resonance. Their washbasin-like appearance offers a relaxed reference to Marcel Duchamp's 'fountain' two years off its centenary.

Britton's work has an awkward seriousness that is compelling. Unlike the rest of the collection they reflect the 'liquidity' of modernity as articulated by Zygmunt Bauman. A substantial number of the pieces have been gifted to the museum and it will be interesting to see how they will be incorporated into the current display policy without loss of content. It is ironic that the permanent collection refurbished with lottery money, the spoils of delusion, should attract so few visitors. The cemetery like atmosphere is reinforced by the reconstruction of Lucie Rie's studio, which captures nothing of its spirit and, like some giant cabinet, a glass walled artist in residence studio apparently abandoned. It is to be hoped that Britton's work will continue to disrupt this deserted attic.

Sebastian Blackie